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ABSTRACT

The rededication of schools to equal educational opportunity for all American children regardless of race, ethnic or socioeconoic background, and parental status does not stop at merely opening the doors to all schools. Actions such as busing are only the prerequisites to the curricular and methodological reforms necessary to provide a true educational affirmative action program. Equal educational opportunity is the right to grow, to expand, and to become more fully functional, and should be adapted to the student rather than adapting the student to the educational system. Several conservative practices that mainly help only middle class students should be abandoned, and teachers should once again work with students, parents, and the community in creating effective educational programs. (CMJ)

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NEEDED FOR THE 80'S:

SCHOOLS THAT START WHERE LEARNERS ARE

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The major educational achievement of the last decade was the rededication of our schools to equal educational opportunity for all American children regardless of race, ethnic and socioeconomic background of parental status. The legal, social, and moral barriers have largely been knocked down. We've removed some of the de facto racial and ethnic segregation by moving children by bus out of racially and economically segregated neighborhoods to more integrated schools.

But such actions, though necessary, are only the pre-requisites to the curricular and methodological reforms necessary to provide a true educational "affirmative" action program. In fact, both the profession and the public are aware that there has been little impact of any of these changes on the wide gap in the effectiveness of our schools in serving the privileged and underprivileged in our country.

The legal barriers are gone. Now we must actualize the promise: We must truly equalize educational opportunity. That's the challenge of the 80's.

The key to this actualization is the central truth that <u>education must start where the learners are</u>. That means we must put the learners at the center of our attention: who they are, where they come from, where they're going. Equal educational opportunity is not the equal chance for everyone to become the same, to be exposed to the same materials, the same body of knowledge. Equal educational opportunity is the right to grow, to expand, to become more fully functional. If we've failed to meet the needs of the minority youth and the children of the poor in our country, it's because we've made them adjust to the school rather than adjusting school to them.

In education, as in so many other attempts to eliminate the effects of discrimination, we thought simply opening closed doors was enough.

But all that opening the doors meant was that many pupils were admitted to classrooms not prepared for their coming. The curriculum, methods, materials, and teachers were largely not open to the differences in language, culture, values, and experience represented by their new pupils. That led to frustration and disillusionment for pupils, for teachers, for parents.

Some teachers found that their low expectations were proven true and some privately confirmed their belief in the inferiority of minority children. Parents reacted to low expectations and demanded that teachers maintain "high standards" which led to intensified pressures on pupils and narrowing the classroom experiences to those calculated to strengthen so-called basic skills. So the classrooms of minority pupils became arenas in which teachers strove to bring a devitalized but unyielding curriculum to alienated, uninspired and sometimes hostile pupils.

Federal programs tended to intensify through financial support what was already not working. Special remedial teachers pulled pupils out of their regular classrooms for extra drill on isolated skills. Federal and state guidelines stressed more frequent use of biased standardized tests. And, in turn, the test led to narrowing the curriculum even more to the things the test tested. Even many of the supposed success stories of these school programs have often turned out to be embittering failures. The scenario often goes like this:

A school (or school system) experiences an influx of minority and/or lower socioeconomic level pupils.

Both the teachers and pupils experience initial discouraging effects. Difference becomes labeled deficiency.

Schools decide "these" children are low achievers because they have difficulty learning.

The conclusion is reached that these children need massive doses of basic skills and more formal highly structured programs. There's no time for the frills.

So the schools adopt a tightly sequenced "direct instruction" program that deals mechanistically with reading with lesser amounts of writing and arithmetic and virtually nothing else.

Tests are chosen which narrowly focus on mechanistic skills.

After a short period of use of the program, three to six months, the children are tested. To everyone's delight, they do moderately well with the group mean being near the national norms. The schools announce they have achieved a successful program for "these" children. But as time continues, the results on the tests become less distinctive and by the time the pupils are in middle grades they are showing the low group test performance they showed before. Furthermore, the pupils have been turned off by the constant pressure and the monotony and barrenness of classroom activity.

The key fallacy involved in all this is that "these" children, as a group, have difficulty learning and that accounts for low achievement patterns. When they're given intensive drill, they do in fact learn what they're being taught. There is nothing wrong with them as learners. And they're able to perform well on tests where the items are much like the exercises they've been drilled on. But the learning is not useful or relevant and is narrowly focussed on skill for its own sake. So as standardized tests in ascending grades begin to shift away from isolated skills to integration and use of reading, writing and arithmetic the pupils show poorly.

The pattern of response of pupils to such rigid, narrow and barren skills programs is not unique to minority and lower socioeconomic level

pupils. But many of the more privileged pupils have several things going for them.

1. The schools and teachers tend to view middle class pupils positively and orient instruction to the experiences common to middle class pupils.
2. Their homes provide many school-related experiences and provide many alternate opportunities to develop abilities that schools value.
3. As they progress, the school program broadens and becomes more stimulating.

All this narrowing of the school experience for the "disadvantaged" has been happening in an era in which the schools generally have been undergoing severe pressure to utilize industrial "systems" approaches and cost accounting procedures to show that tax payers are getting value for their money.

This industrialization has particularly taken its toll from underprivileged children. "Accountability" criteria for promotion and graduation are linked to standardized tests or to criterion referenced tests. High failure rates create defeatist feelings among pupils and low morale among teachers who feel they're being blamed for the inadequacies of the system. The accountability laws accomplish, absolutely, the segregation and discrimination which were once legally mandated but now is done in the name of achievement. Even patterns of de facto neighborhood segregation are being reestablished as those who can afford to do so flee schools with low test scores.

But the schools can achieve the goal of actualizing equal educational opportunity. We can return to a positive path of accepting the learners and their cultures and building the professionalism in our teachers and administrators that can produce universally effective schools.

Even among the privileged our schools have not tended to accept the full

range of differences among children. Those whose interests, values, abilities vary significantly from the norm have not been well served by inflexible curricula. The trend toward focus on "basic skills" and minimal competencies has hurt these children, too. To provide equal educational opportunity, schools must accord these children the right to be different and help them grow, too. Too many creative children are turned off by schools.

A Historical View

Thomas Jefferson's dream of schools as a democratizing force in the development of our nation, with free education available for all, was a long time in developing.

Our first century was long past before we could claim with any reality that every American child had a free elementary education truly available. And not until a combination of court decisions, child labor laws, compulsory attendance laws, and economic changes occurred did we make universally available secondary education. The comprehensive high school was slow in its evolution and it still has not shaken off the narrowing tradition of secondary education as preparation for the university.

Early advocates of compulsory, free public education sold the public on the role of schools as the crucible or melting pot that made loyal Americans out of culturally diverse immigrants. They sold the immigrants on education as the socio-economic ladder into the middle class. They sold industrial and political leaders on the need for an educated work force to function in a modern industrial society. That meant that schools aimed toward conformity to a narrow norm and justified that in terms of preparing pupils for their roles as workers and citizens.

As schools developed, their objectives became more complex. They became concerned with education for citizenship, for mental and physical health,

for the future as well as the present. The curriculum which had grown in a largely unplanned way in response to various traditions and pressures needed to become more rational and more relevant to the needs of learners and the aims of education.

Professionalism in education began to develop with a growing base in knowledge of learning, teaching, child development, and curricular theory.

The goals of professionalism were:

Schools that could serve our pluralistic American society, now and in the future.

Schools that could serve each and all learners.

Schools staffed by knowledgeable professionals dedicated to their pupils and to the improvement of education.

Almost from the beginning educators tended to polarize. Some saw an educational science emerging with an explicit quantifiable technology which would solve all problems of teaching and learning an explicit detail with a high degree of efficiency and predictability.

Others saw the relationship between teaching and learning as more subtle and complex. They saw education in essentially humanistic terms and the science of education as focussing around child study, curriculum development and the professional knowledge of teachers.

It was John Dewey more than anyone that articulated the essentials of humanistic education based in scientific understanding of the learning and teaching as they relate to developing personal and social needs.

Though Dewey began publishing his ideas before the turn of the century, it was not until the thirties that his ideas began to seriously influence schools and teaching. Some of Dewey's key premises were:

- Adapting schools to learners rather than making learners adapt to

the schools. Accepting their differences.

- Defining the curriculum in terms of children and their needs and placing the child at the center of concern.
- Viewing the role of the school as accepting learners and expanding on where they are when they come to school.
- Involving children in learning by doing, that is making them active participants in their own education.
- Integrating the curriculum and centering it around problem solving experiences.
- Making education life itself rather than preparation for living.

The era of the 30's and 40's was a period of great innovation and experimentation in American schools. Much of this innovation was based on the work of Dewey and others who came to be called progressive educators. Some major achievements of the time were:

- Expansion of social studies programs organized around social topics and problems and integrated with the language arts through "units".
- Elimination of non-promotion, tracking, and ability grouping and provision for grouping within heterogeneous classes by interest and pupil choice in order to serve the full range of abilities. The work of social psychologists had strong influence to redefine the classroom as a social system.
- Organizing the curriculum to move from familiar to unfamiliar and from near to far building on what was known about children's conceptual development.
- Focus in selection of content on function and relevance for the learners.

In this same era, a child study movement flourished dedicated to providing teachers with as much insight as possible into children and their natural physical and mental growth so that teachers might be better able to reach each child.

I don't want to paint a picture of a golden age in education or claim that these changes were realized in all or even a majority of schools. American schools have always shown a wide range of response to innovation. What I want to show, however, is that there has been in existence for some time an articulated and demonstrably effective base for dealing with serving all children and expanding on cultural pluralism and individual difference in our schools.

In 1928, Harold Rugg described the child-centered school in this manner:

> "Pupils are alive, active, working hard, inventing, organizing, contributing original ideas, assembling materials, carrying out enterprises. As individuals and as social groups pupils grow and they grow in their capacity to govern themselves, to organize machinery for handling their collective affairs as well as in individual capacity for creative self-expression."
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> (Rugg, 1928, p. 57)

Somehow as a result of a series of events: World War II, the huge expansion of our schools in the forties and fifties to cope with the population explosion, the Sputnik era with its emphasis on academic competition and high schievers, the tremendous pressures on our schools that the civil rights upheavals produced, and of economic and political pressures in the current era, our schools lost the direction set by the progressives.

What our schools need for the 80's is a new progressive education built on the solid base of the original movement but informed by new scientific knowledge about human development, cognition, language, and the relationship of teaching and learning. This new progressivism needs to be focussed on those children and youth whose needs our schools are currently not according equal educational opportunity.

A key tenet of the neo-progressive movement must be accepting cultural and linguistic difference and treating it as strength rather than weakness.

Several decades of research and theoretical development has supported the wisdom of starting where the learner is. We can demonstrate now that all children learn language easily and well and that the form of language they learn, the dialect of their home and community, is the one best suited to their needs for communication, for thinking and for learning. Starting where the learner is means accepting the home language as the base and helping children to expand this base in and out of school.

Each dialect of each language, we now understand is equal to all others in serving the language needs of its users. All dialects are systematic and rule governed. All provide for growth and change to meet their users needs.

If pupils come to school with a language other than English then schools must accept that language and support the expansion if its use while assisting growth in productive and receptive control of English. We cannot impose the condition on non-English speakers that they must first acquire English before we will permit them to learn in school.

If pupils come to school with a socio-regional dialect which has low social status we cannot impose on them the condition that they must learn "standard" English before they may learn in school. And if, as is true of most bilinguals in the United States, pupils come to school controlling low status dialects of two languages we cannot negate this strength and render them "non-verbal".

Similarly in recent decades ethnographic research has demonstrated that there are no "culturally deprived" people. All children bring a cultural heritage to school. Schools can be flexible and adapt to the cultural pluralism of American pupils and help them expand on their cultural heritage. In doing so they are working with pupils rather than

at cross purposes to them. There is no need to force pupils to choose between what they are and what they want to become. They can develop pride in their ethnic, linguistic, and racial heritage as they expand their ability to function in wider cultural circles.

From cognitive psychology, we've learned that learning is interactive: what the learners already know and believe strongly influences how they will interpret new experience and what they will learn. Dewey preferred the term transaction, to indicate the extent to which learners are involved through experience with their environment. Piaget has helped us to understand learning as assimilation and accommodation. Learning is seen as a process of internal growth and change within the learner.

All of these developments have led us away from simplistic passive views of learning in which young people are considered empty vessels to be filled with knowledge, one piece at a time. Schools, to be successful for all pupils, cannot be places where things are done to children. They must be places where children grow through useful relevant experience. We've come to understand that literacy develops naturally just as oracy does when language is meaningful and functional. That leads to holistic literacy programs in which the emphasis is on using real meaningful written language from the very beginning. Research helps us to understand the driving need to make sense out of things that motivates and keeps reading moving. It helps us to understand that children develop schema which are strongly influenced by their cultures which they use to predict, organize, and comprehend what they read. It helps us understand that we learn to read by reading and to write by writing.

Out of this emerges a greatly strengthened foundation for the child-centered curriculum Dewey and his colleagues advocated. It's an optimal

curriculum for actualizing equal educational opportunity because it sets neither pre-requisites for learning nor limits on what can be learned. It is not a curriculum to be imposed on learners but a curriculum to be defined in terms of the learners themselves. It is sensitive to the socio-cultural and personal differences among learners and expands on strengths. It is open not closed, positive not negative, expansive not restrictive, dynamic not fixed. It views knowledge as relative to the learner. It sees ends becoming means as pupils learn to learn.

In this neo-progressive view schools can personalize learning while helping children to use and respond effectively to social interaction. That's because each child is seen as unique and his/her interests, abilities, enthusiasms, needs, and growth patterns are respected.

This is a curriculum that is sensitive to and responsive to minority and underprivileged learners because it is sensitive to all learners. Its basic principles and methods are the same in the inner city as they are in the affluent suburbs because flexibility is their most essential quality. It builds on the universal human attributes of language and learning while being adaptive to the personal and social differences to be found in any classroom.

The role of the teachers in the new progressive classrooms is that of facilitator, guide, monitor. The teachers are informed professionals able to help children define problems, see relationships, identify needs and seek solutions. The teachers know children and they know about teaching, learning, language, and the structure of knowledge. They can monitor progress, see developing strengths, help pupils find their way around barriers. They can shape the curriculum to take advantage of the learner's strengths. They help learners define their aims.

The materials of learning are those of the real world including the community itself. But there is active use of a full range of media to bring the world into the classroom.

An evolution of school texts from the controlling force that determines the day-to-day curriculum to resource books that teachers can use to support a flexible program needs to be continued. School texts have deteriorated badly in quality and utility as a result of the back-to-basics movement. A good deal of the progress made in past decades to make texts more usable, interesting and more relevant to learners has been reversed. Recent texts are overlayed with sterile management systems keyed to narrowly viewed skill sequences. Publishers advertise how old-fashioned the ideas in their texts are.

Teachers may need to set aside the use of such text series and use other resources to serve the varied needs, interests and ability levels of their pupils.

Our classrooms need to be organized so that teachers can make learning relevant to each learner. That means the use of interest centers. It means paperback and hardcover book libraries in the classrooms. It means movable, modular furniture to facilitate individual and small group instruction. A variety of staffing plans including teams composed of teachers and aides needs to be used. That can make it possible to provide for language difference as well as difference in interest and ability. It's less important that we open the classroom walls than that we open the curriculum and minds of teachers and administrators.

In recent decades the role of school administrator has narrowed to that of manager of the industrialized structured system. In the new progressive tradition the principal must once again become the curricular leader

facilitating and guiding the professional staff and making sure all children are welcome and growing.

The entire educational profession needs to be revitalized to make use of new knowledge in planning the new progressive curriculum. Federal programs can be very useful in encouraging the research, synthesizing and dissemination necessary to create a practical program teachers can implement. Particularly our teacher education colleges need to develop people who can translate theory and research into practice through in-service education for teachers. Highly effective teachers, particularly those who are minority members themselves, need to be encouraged to develop themselves through such programs as teacher educators and administrators so that they may lead the way for others.

Current uses of standardized tests must be abandoned. Nothing has been more destructive of teacher morale and curricular relevance than the abuse and misuse of group evaluation. These tests are the chief instrument of institutional discrimination and the major barrier to equalizing educational opportunity.

In any case, neo-progressism has useful alternatives to offer:

Self evaluation. If children are involved in their own learning, if the aims are their aims then they can judge their own progress. Have I understood? Am I learning? Is my solution to the problem an effective one? What else do I need to know? Am I making progress? These are questions teachers can help pupils ask and answer. No evaluation is more useful than self evaluation in planning further learning.

Our schools have been preoccupied with evaluation for rewards and punishments. Se we confused the purposes of evaluation. Evaluation's primary purpose is to see where learners are so they can be helped to grow.

Kid-watching. Earlier we said an important child study movement was flourishing in the 30's. Teachers need to become "kid-watchers" once again. They need to know how to observe learners and infer their strengths and needs so that they can facilitate their growth. Teachers spend up to 30 hours a week with children but expensive test programs have undercut their confidence to form their own evaluative judgements. They've come to believe that a test written in Princeton, New Jersey or Iowa City and administered in a few hours can somehow show more than they know about their students. We must give the authority and responsibility for useful evaluation back to the teachers.

Public scrutiny. The public, particularly parents, have a right to know what our schools are doing. Parents need to be involved in planning. They deserve regular professional reports and they must be welcome in the schools. They need the help of professionals in knowing how to judge pupil progress. That means they need help in developing alternatives to "common sense" views of what schools are accomplishing.

Conclusion

The new progressism I am calling for is by no means a reality yet. But I'm convinced that there are strong forces which will make it a reality.

One force is the knowledge base I've cited. This knowledge base from recent scientific inquiry creates a strong pressure for change.

Another force is rebellion of teachers and other professional educators against the dehumanizing and limiting minimal competency-accountability-systems programs. Teachers have been pushed too far and their alarm for the welfare of children is causing them to seek positive alternatives.

But the major pressure is from the children themselves. We've made them

a promise: that promise is equal educational opportunity. They will not be denied that. They will continue to reject schools, in one way or another, until our schools become truly open to them all.